

Donkey bomb attack at Gaza border part of escalating violence

By GENEVIEVE LONG
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A donkey-drawn wagon that was rigged with an explosive device was detonated at the Gaza security fence on Tuesday morning. The explosion, which happened in the northern Gaza Strip, is being blamed by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) on an unidentified Palestinian terrorist.

The explosive device, of which there is no available description, exploded when the donkey was approaching the security fence, instantly killing the animal. No people were harmed.

"This incident is yet another attempt by terrorists to conceal their operations using agricultural activities for cover," said an IDF spokesperson in a statement.

Other attacks using livestock have happened at the Gaza border, including a June 2009 attempted attack near the Nahal Oz crossing when gunmen approached the security fence with several trucks and five horses carrying explosive devices. Several of the gunmen were wearing explosive suicide belts.

The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, part of a pro-Israeli NGO, reports that last week there were several incidents along the Gaza security fence, including the killing by an IDF soldier of a Palestinian civilian who approached the fence.

Two mortar shells struck the Ashkelon Shore Regional Council building in Israel early Tuesday, the latest in a string of four rockets and mortars fired from the Gaza Strip



A Palestinian man rides on his donkey cart past burning tires in Gaza. A similar donkey-drawn wagon was rigged with an explosive device and detonated at the Gaza security fence on Tuesday morning. MAHMUD HAMS/GETTY IMAGES

that have struck Israel in the past week.

In response to the attacks, on Tuesday night the Israeli air force struck a tunnel in the northern Gaza Strip. A second tunnel was hit in the southern Gaza Strip. Both tunnels were less than a mile from the security fence. Israeli authorities say that the intended use of the tunnels was to infiltrate the country and attack Israeli civilians and soldiers.

The IDF identified direct hits in both of the tunnel strikes.

According to an unconfirmed report from the Palestinian Authority-affiliated Ma'an News Agency, 15 Palestinians were injured in the attacks, some sustaining "critical" wounds. Ma'an said that Adham Abu Selmiyya, the media coordinator for Gaza medical services, told them the injured were evacuated to hospitals in the northern Gaza Strip.

The recent spate of violence comes as a flotilla of activists backed and supported by Turkey, Greece, Ireland, and the U.K. approaches the Gaza Strip by sea this week. About 750 pro-Palestinian activists in passenger boats are expected to arrive in Gaza by Saturday, in a bid to break through Israel's embargo on the region.

The IDF says they hold Hamas as "solely responsible for terrorist activities" in Gaza.

Sweden prepares for royal wedding

By BARBRO PLOGANDER & ARON LAMM
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STOCKHOLM, Sweden—Swedish media have been reveling in everything royal for well over a year now as Crown Princess Victoria prepares to marry Daniel Westling, a "commoner" and her former personal trainer.

Special focus has been given to the fact that this is a marriage of love between a princess and a common man, unusual from a historical perspective.

There has been some controversy surrounding the upcoming royal wedding as to who will accompany Princess Victoria as she walks down the aisle on June 19.

According to centuries-old Swedish tradition, both the bride and groom enter the church together to show that the woman is entering the marriage of her own free will. However, rumour now has it that Princess Victoria's father, King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, will walk his daughter to the altar.

The tradition of the father delivering the bride to her husband-to-be, although common in other countries, is unusual in Sweden. Important figures within the church have raised objections, saying the custom implies some form of trade, as though the king is trading with the future husband of his daughter.

Some Swedes object to it as a "Hollywood" idea that has no place in a Swedish royal wedding, while others think that it is not a big deal and should be decided by the people directly involved.

Other peculiarities surrounding the wedding include the fact that Princess Victoria was not born the heir to the throne. Rather, she was made Crown Princess and heir apparent in 1980 after a change in the Act of Succession of 1870 removed a gender bias that favoured the eldest son rather than the eldest heir. That change put Princess Victoria in line to the throne rather than her younger brother, who was born heir apparent.

Also, as the heir to the Swedish throne, Princess Victoria, 32, is in fact the only person of age in Sweden who has to ask her father's—and the



COPENHAGEN, DENMARK - APRIL 15: (L-R) Prince Carl Philip of Sweden, Crown Princess Victoria de Suede and Daniel Westling attend the Gala Performance in celebration of Queen Margrethe's 70th Birthday on April 15, 2010 in Copenhagen, Denmark. JULIEN M. HEKIMIAN/GETTY IMAGES

Swedish government's—permission to marry. Unless she is willing to renounce her royal status, she must receive their approval of her proposed husband.

Westling will be given the title of duke after the marriage. A recently-formed Facebook group jokingly suggested that Westling should be walked down the aisle by his mother, as an acknowledgment of his subservient position in the marriage. Victoria will be queen and head of state, but her husband will only be the queen's consort.

Stockholm and the rest of Sweden is now busy preparing for the royal wedding, which will be the first since King Carl XVI Gustaf married Queen Silvia, also on June 19, in 1976.

The occasion has given Swedish Republicans the opportunity to restate their case against the hereditary monarchy, which they see as outdated. Others complain that the wedding bill is being paid for by Swedish taxpayers. However, with all the tourism and merchandising, the state is expected to earn a healthy net profit in taxes.

NASA confirms end of Mars Phoenix

New image suggesting damage reveals that the craft is no longer operational

By CONAN MILNER
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NASA has declared that operations for its Phoenix Mars Lander have ended.

Following repeated unsuccessful attempts to contact the spacecraft—and a new image from the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter (MRO) revealing signs of severe ice damage to the lander's solar panels—NASA has concluded that the Phoenix mission is officially over.

"The Phoenix spacecraft succeeded in its investigations and exceeded its planned lifetime," Fuk Li, manager of the Mars Exploration Program at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., said in a press release.

"Although its work is finished, analysis of information from Phoenix's science activities will continue for some time to come."



PHOENIX MARS: An artist's conception of the Phoenix Mars Lander on the Red Planet. The Phoenix landed on Mars on May 25, 2008. NASA/JPL VIA GETTY IMAGES

NASA admits that Phoenix was not designed to survive the dark, cold Martian winter. Yet the agency still held some hope that the craft may have survived, so it began attempts to listen for the lander after abundant sunshine returned to the red planet.

Last week, NASA's Mars Odyssey orbiter flew over the Phoenix landing

site 61 times in a last-ditch effort to communicate with the craft, but failed to make contact. This followed 150 flights in three earlier listening campaigns this year that produced similar results.

A recent photo added further evidence of Phoenix's demise. The MRO image of Phoenix taken this month

by a special high-resolution camera on board the spacecraft suggested the lander no longer casts shadows the way it did during its working lifetime.

Apparent changes in the shadows cast by the lander are consistent with predictions of how Phoenix could be damaged by the harsh conditions of a Martian winter. It was anticipated that the weight of a carbon dioxide ice buildup could bend or break the lander's solar panels, destroying its power supply.

The solar-powered lander completed its three-month mission and kept working until sunlight waned two months later. Earth-based research continues on discoveries Phoenix made during summer conditions at the far-northern site where it landed on May 25, 2008.

During its mission, Phoenix confirmed and examined patches of the widespread deposits of underground water ice detected by Odyssey and identified calcium carbonate—suggesting the occasional presence of thawed water. The lander also found Martian soil chemistry with significant implications for life, and observed falling snow. The mission's biggest surprise was the discovery of perchlorate, an oxidizing chemical on Earth that serves as food for some microbes and is poisonous to other forms of life.

Israeli PM gets unexpected invite to White House

By GIDEON BELMAKER
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JERUSALEM—Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu received an unexpected invitation to the White House on Wednesday. The offer came during a working meeting between Netanyahu and White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel who was in Israel on a family visit for his son's Bar Mitzvah.

During the meeting, Emanuel invited the Israeli PM to meet U.S. President Barack Obama after his upcoming trip to Canada.

"On behalf of the president — you will be in Canada, and he has asked me to extend an invitation to you to come visit him at the White House for a working meeting to discuss both our shared security interests

The Obama administration has been working tirelessly to restart negotiations between the two foes—efforts that now may be starting to bear fruit

as well as our full cooperation on seeking peace between Israel and its neighbours," said Emanuel, according to a transcript from the Israeli Prime Minister's Office.

In recent weeks, American special envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, has been meeting with Israeli and Palestinian leaders in a round of "proximity talks."

The Obama administration has been working tirelessly to restart negotiations between the two foes—efforts that now may be starting to

bear fruit. The talks are scheduled to last four months, with the hope of restarting direct negotiations as quickly as possible.

The surprise invitation to meet Obama was extended against a backdrop of what appears to be a warming of relations between the White House and Jerusalem.

Relations between the two allies hit an all-time low in early March when a senior Israeli minister announced plans to build 1,600 new Jewish homes in East Jerusalem

during a diplomatic visit by U.S. Vice President Joe Biden. The U.S. opposes expanding Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem, which Palestinians wish to claim as their capital of a future independent state.

During Netanyahu's trip to the U.S. at the end of that month he met with Obama but there was no photo-op or official statement—something unusual for a meeting at that level. Netanyahu was also reportedly left alone in a room while the president went to have dinner with his family.

Wednesday's invitation is a clear sign that relations are back on an upswing. Israeli government officials recently met with Jewish community leaders in the U.S. who also reportedly reaffirmed the strong alliance between the two nations.

First battery of US missile system unveiled in Poland

By ANDREY VOLKOV
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The first battery of the U.S. surface-to-air Patriot missile system was unveiled by Polish and U.S. officials on Wednesday, a move that has irritated Russia.

The Patriot system, to be installed in Poland, is a long-range, all-altitude, all-weather air defense system designed to counter tactical ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and advanced aircraft.

A U.S. unit consisting of more than 100 American soldiers was formally welcomed by Polish Defense Minister Bogdan Klich. The soldiers will train their Polish counterparts to use the missile system at the base in Morag, about 64 kilometres from the Russian border.

The Patriot missile system was transported to Poland last week by rail from a U.S. base in Kaiserslautern, Germany.

"We regard the deployment of the Patriot system in Poland as an important step increasing our national security and in developing strategic cooperation with the United States," said Klich, according to AFP.

The Russians feel differently, however. An unnamed Russian foreign ministry official claimed that the move to place the Patriot missile system in Poland would not bring security to the region, Russian ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

"Such military activity does not help to strengthen our mutual security to develop relations of trust and predictability

in this region," he said, adding that Russian officials could not understand the reason for the cooperation on the project between the United States and Poland.

Polish officials insist that deployment is not a threat but rather part of their ongoing military development since the country joined NATO in 1999, a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Warsaw and Washington agreed on the Patriot deal in 2008 while negotiating the installation of a controversial anti-missile shield in Poland and its neighbour, Czech Republic. However, the shield project was rejected.

In September 2009, President Barack Obama cancelled the shield project, as Moscow claimed it was a threat at their doorstep. The White House said the shield project would be used to ward off the potential threat of long distance missiles from Iran and for security purposes—something Polish leaders were in agreement with.

Meanwhile, the attention of the Polish leadership has been diverted to some degree, as the country continues to fight flooding, which began last week and has killed at least 15 people and forced thousands of others to evacuate their homes.

The country's main river, the Vistula, burst its banks last weekend, flooding thousands of miles of land in the south of the country. The main flow of water is coursing on the north now.